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ABSTRACT

Technical communications courses, which frequently present the research proposal as part of the report writing segment, rarely teach the grant proposal, even though it can provide the instructor with a vehicle for presenting such rhetorical strategies as audience analysis and persuasive writing. In addition to its problem solving structure, the formal proposal also provides a classic presentation of logic--a syllogism--whose major premise is the ability of the company to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the granting agency's needs. The minor premise(s) are the specific points that illustrate how the contractor plans to use his qualifications to implement a specific plan or approach. In a very real sense the proposal introduction is the most persuasive part of the proposal, for the contracting agency needs to be convinced that the remainder of the proposal is worth reading. A good introduction will include a description of the company's chief strengths and characteristics, and a short statement of its view of project requirements. This statement of work, which can be examined for its audience analysis, ideally should tell the contractor what is wanted by the requesting agency and then give the contractor a clear idea of what is needed. One effective technique for teaching the statement of work involves having pairs of students role play as the participants in the proposal process. The instructor also may wish to show how the enthymeme, which is a rhetorical technique used to imply rather than state a causal connection, can make a proposal more effective. The conclusion, or final statement of the syllogism/proposal, is that the award of the contract should be made to the contractor based on the merits of the major and minor premises. (HOD)

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Teaching the Grant Proposal as a Problem-Solving Strategy: A Rhetorical Approach

INTRODUCTION

With more than 250,000 American companies doing at least part of their business with federal agencies,[1] writing the grant proposal has become big business. While many Business Communications courses incorporate the research proposal into their report-writing segments, few teach the grant proposal although more, perhaps, should do so. In addition to the vital role that this type of proposal plays in industry today (and the growing likelihood that more of our students will need this skill later on in their careers), the grant proposal is especially useful in advanced Business Communications courses because it gives the instructor an effective vehicle for presenting in a rhetorical mode such skills as audience analysis and persuasive writing.

Let me make one point very clear here before I continue. I am not advocating that grant proposal writing be taught in Introductory Business Communications classes, for that would be like teaching a child to run before that same child could walk with any confidence or authority. Students should have some experience in writing letters, short reports, and shorter project proposals before attempting anything as demanding as the grant proposal. In advanced-level Business Communications courses, however, the grant proposal can be an invaluable tool

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ABSTRACT

With more than 250,000 American companies doing at least part of their business with federal agencies, the grant proposal has become big business. While many technical communications courses teach the research proposal as part of the report-writing segment, few teach the grant proposal although more, perhaps, should do so. In addition to the vital role that this type of proposal plays in industry today (and the growing likelihood that more of our students will need this skill later in their careers), the grant proposal gives the instructor an effective vehicle for presenting such rhetorical strategies as audience analysis and persuasive writing.

I propose to begin my paper by providing an overview of some of the different types of proposals, noting how most of them share a basic problem-solving structure that includes problem definition, objectives and limitations, a statement of methodology, and tentative conclusions. Next my paper will look at some of the special features that characterize the grant proposal noting what rhetorical techniques can be learned from a discussion of the Request for Proposal (RFP), the evaluation checklist, and an audience analysis (seeing the business through the agency's eyes).

In addition to its problem-solving structure, the formal proposal can also be viewed as a classic presentation of logic--a syllogism--whose major premise is the ability of the company to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the agency's needs. The minor premises include the technical argument and the special qualifications of the company and staff while the conclusion can be thought of as the proposal's goal: a contract award from the granting agency.

for teaching not only the grant proposal itself but also some subtle persuasive strategies as well as audience analysis.

THE GRANT PROPOSAL AS SYLLOGISM

One technique that I have found particularly effective for teaching the grant proposal is to teach it in the form of a syllogism, a classic rhetorical presentation of logic. This provides the instructor with several opportunities. First, he can reduce a complex labyrinth of government paperwork down to a few bare essentials by viewing the Request for Proposal, or RFP, as a familiar rhetorical paradigm: the syllogism. Secondly, the instructor can use the syllogism as a device for showing the logical sequence that evolves when the contractor tries to match his own qualifications and schedule of services with the agency's statement of need. In specific terms, the major premise of the syllogism is the qualifications that the contractor sets forth in the opening section of the Introduction. Here the contractor demonstrates as strongly as possible his ability to perform the task outlined in the RFP. The minor premises, or "premise," are the specific points that illustrate how the contractor plans to use his qualifications to implement a specific plan or approach. These premises often take the form of the discussion section of the proposal and usually include an analysis of various approaches, the selection of a recommended approach, a list of deliverables, and some sort of cost analysis. The conclusion, or final statement of the syllogism, is that an award or contract should be made to the contractor based on the merits of the major and minor premises.

Viewing (or teaching) the proposal as a syllogism underscores the importance that persuasion plays in Business Communications. In a very real sense, the proposal introduction should be the most persuasive part of the proposal for the contracting agency needs to be convinced that the remainder of the proposal is worth reading. A good Introduction will include a description of the company, clearly identifying its chief strengths and characteristics. It should also contain a short statement of the company's understanding of the requirement as presented in the Statement of Work. The following partial Introduction, written in response to an RFP requesting a study of the economic impact of wind energy conversion systems, is effective for some of the reasons mentioned above.

SECTION I

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE OFFEROR

The Systems Division of Monroe Technical Corporation is pleased to be able to offer the Department of Energy a unique resource, in response to the solicitation referenced above. The Systems Division has been actively engaged in studies of wind energy conversion systems since 1975. In that time, we have carried out studies and development programs for the Department of Energy, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Agriculture. We offer an organization and staff of professionals highly experienced in the field. (Fuller details of organization and staff qualifications appear in later sections of this proposal.) However, we are privileged to offer the Energy Department a special and unique resource: the staff we shall propose to carry out the study will be headed by none other than Dr. Rudolf Steinman, who is widely acknowledged as the leading authority in this field.[2]

In stressing the company's prior experience and noting its special resources which include the services of a noted professional in the field, the proposer has persuasively

identified the particular strengths of his company and has brought those strengths to bear in the opening part of the proposal. Discussing a particular proposal such as this one leads students into a discussion of other qualities that might be persuasively used in the Introduction of a grant proposal. A brainstorming session might produce a list of qualities similar to those found in the following checklist:

1. Prior experience
2. Understanding of the need or problem
3. Cost factors
4. Management
5. Schedules and/or progress reports
6. Qualifications of personnel
7. Available resources
8. Reputation
9. References

In any case, the self-assessment should be generated internally by the class and should not be self-imposed. Ideally, the self-assessment should reflect the class's understanding of the persuasive nature of the proposal writing process.

STATEMENT OF WORK

Because the success or failure of the Introduction to a proposal quite often depends not only on the contractor's qualifications but also on his understanding of the Statement of Work (SOW), we also spend some class time examining the SOW from the standpoint of audience analysis. The Statement of Work, or Scope of Work, appears in the Request for Proposal (RFP).

Ideally, it should tell the contractor what is wanted by the requesting agency, and then it should give the contractor a clear idea of what is needed including the constraints within which the project must function. Unfortunately, for many reasons, SOW's are often less than completely lucid (see the Gas Research Institute's SOW), and the contractor must make a strenuous effort to determine what the customer really needs. In short, it's all too often up to the contractor to interpret and to rewrite the SOW given its importance in the overall evaluation of the proposal. The following SOW taken from an RFP of the Gas Research Institute[3] illustrates some of the points mentioned above:

SECTION A: SCOPE OF WORK

BACKGROUND

More than 75% of new and replacement gas distribution piping being installed at present is plastic and more than 80% of this is polyethylene. Because the use of polyethylene piping in the gas industry is relatively recent, the gas industry has sponsored a substantial R & D effort to better characterize and insure the reliability of this material.

Gas distribution companies rely on various differing laboratory tests and industry standards to evaluate materials for their piping systems. It is desired to have piping systems that are failure-free for periods exceeding 50 years, which means that some form of accelerated testing must be used. This commonly entails elevated temperatures or pressures or the use of chemical accelerators such as Igepal. The correlation between the results of such tests and the performance of materials and systems in the field is not well substantiated. In addition, correlations in many cases rest on no theoretical and little empirical foundation. This technological area needs to be based on a firmer theoretical foundation, perhaps using new approaches that can lead to the development of more comprehensive characterization procedures.

IMPLEMENTATION

The research program which GRI will support will have as its objective the formulation and validation of failure theories which can form a basis for accelerated testing of polyethylene piping

materials. All presently used theoretical approaches such as the Arrhenius relationship, fatigue crack propagation, continuum mechanics and others, should be evaluated and incorporated into the body of theory if appropriate. Critical experiments are needed to aid in the development of and to test the proposed theory. Present accelerated tests in use will be evaluated in light of the theory. Anticipated contract duration will be between 24 and 36 months. The available funds for this activity are approximately $250,000.

The following reports will be required:

Quarterly Progress Reports	- 15 copies
Annual Reports	- 60 copies
Final Reports	- 60 copies

One effective classroom technique for teaching the SOW is to have students work in dyads and role play the two principal participants in the proposal process. By assuming the role of granting agency and proposing company, students are asked to critique the existing SOW (a copy of which I give them) for completeness and clarity of expression. They are then asked to play the role of the proposing company by rewriting the original SOW in order to outline specifically the project's assignments and the approach that will be used to meet these requirements in a way that avoids the muddled language of the original SOW. After this is done, they write the Introduction interpreting the need as expressed in the Statement of Work.

THE ENTHYMEME AND THE GRANT PROPOSAL

Often the enthymeme, a form of syllogism where one premise or conclusion is implied and not stated, is used as a rhetorical technique in the grant proposal when the proposer wishes to imply rather than state a causal connection. The instructor may wish to examine how approaches presented within the proposal are made more persuasive when the enthymeme is used effectively.

The following excerpt is taken from a successful proposal funded by the U. S. Forestry Service for $80,000, which discusses how to design and implement a training program for Forestry Service engineers. The writer employs the enthymeme in the final three sentences of his discussion of approach to try to persuade the reader of the effectiveness of his approach:

> 'Teaching to the examination' is sometimes regarded as a shallow and superficial method of loading the scales in favor of the instructor. On the other hand, it can be a perfectly sound and valid approach to training--if the examination covers all the desired behaviors. Then, mastery of the examination is mastery of the subject.[4]

If we reconstruct the enthymeme into a syllogism, it would look something like this:

Major premise: A perfectly sound and valid approach to training is the examination that covers all the desired behaviors.

Minor premises (missing or implied): This examination (the one argued for in the proposal) covers all the desired behaviors.

Conclusion: Then mastery of the examination is mastery of the subject (which can be translated to read "a perfectly sound and valid approach to training").

THE SOLUTION AS A SEQUENCE OF STEPS

Sometimes offering a solution that is tied in directly to the problem of need and discussing this solution clearly in a sequence of steps is another effective rhetorical technique found in grant proposal writing. The following excerpt taken

from the proposal mentioned above illustrates this technique well. In analyzing the objectives of a training program for the Forestry Service,[5] the writer presents his analysis in a sequence for persuasive reasons:

1) The Target Population--Who is to be trained?
   The educational background and/or skills of those in a training program will determine, to a great extent, the level and content of the curriculum to be designed. However, since it is usually not possible to describe an archetype or "typical" student, we must define the spectrum--the extremes of the population--and do so in a manner that enables us to gauge where the population tends to group or, if possible, describe several "typical" students, all of whom will be trained.
2) Terminal Skills and Behaviors--We must determine, concurrently, what they are to be trained to do.
   Job skills and knowledge must be broken down into their component parts and segregated into manual skills and conceptual skills until specific subject areas are defined with enough precision to enable a training design to be synthesized.
3) Training Design--How they are to be trained.
   The task analysis will also result, finally, in a recommended design which will include various subjects to be taught, the tests and other ancillary materials, the length of the program, and the scope of non-programmed training, such as lab or workshop sessions. Strategies will be developed at this point for teaching, for testing, and for motivating.

CONCLUSION

Teaching students in advanced Business Communications classes the art of writing the grant proposal does more than just teach them an important and valuable business communications skill. It offers the instructor an important vehicle for teaching principles of rhetoric and logic. The formal grant proposal often incorporates many of the classic elements of logic--in particular, the syllogism. The major premise can be viewed as the ability of the company to address the contracting agency's

needs in terms of that company's major qualifications. This is most often done in the proposal introduction. The minor premise, or premises, is the implementation of an approach that draws on the company's major qualifications. The conclusion, or final statement of the syllogism, is that an award of contract should be made to the contractor based on the merits of the major and minor premises.

The grant proposal is also useful for teaching audience analysis and certain persuasive strategies. A careful examination of the Statement of Work (SOW) can illustrate to students the value of adopting the rhetorical stance of seeing the proposal from the reader's viewpoint in order to redefine the often vaguely worded problem. The strategy of using the enthymeme or of presenting the problem's solution as a sequence of clearly defined steps illustrates persuasive techniques often at work in the grant proposal.

Notes

[1]Holtz, Herman and Terry Schmidt. The Winning Proposal and How to Write It. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981, p. xv.

[2]Modified from a technical proposal written by the Systems Division of Syzgy Technical Corporation in response to RFP DE-80-A-10-0009 for a study of the economic impact of wind energy conversion systems. Quoted from Holtz and Schmidt, p. 157.

[3]Taken from RFP #83-260-0110, Gas Research Institute, Contract Services Department, Chicago, Illinois 60631. Date of RFP was November 18, 1982.

[4]Taken from a successful proposal designed for the U. S. Forestry Service as cited in Holtz and Schmidt, p. 318.

[5]Taken from a successful proposal designed for the U. S. Forestry Service as cited in Holtz and Schmidt, p. 319. The original sequence was unnumbered.